

97-84020-9

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diseases in the army

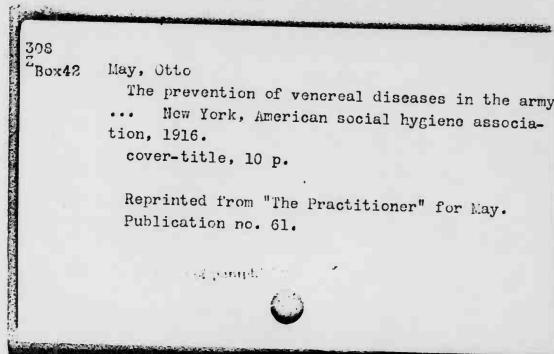
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DATE FILMED: 2-10-97

INITIALS: MS

TRACKING #: 20883

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The Prevention of Venereal Diseases in the Army

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By

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*Joint Honorary Secretary British National Council
for Combating Venereal Diseases*

Reprinted from
"The Practitioner" for May, 1916

The American Social Hygiene Association

105 West 40th Street, New York City

1916

115 Feb 6 - 19

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THE PREVENTION OF VENEREAL DISEASES IN
THE ARMY.

BY OTTO MAY, M.A., M.D., ETC.

Joint Hon. Sec. National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases.

"THE PRACTITIONER," LIMITED,
HOWARD STREET, STRAND, W.C.

The American Social Hygiene Association has followed closely the development of measures for the prevention of venereal disease in England and other European countries and especially the efforts made to spread information and warnings about these diseases among the armies engaged in the present war in Europe.

The British Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases, in its recent report, recommends that "The National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases be recognized as an authoritative body for the purpose of spreading knowledge and giving advice in regard to the question of venereal diseases in its varied aspects" and that only such literature as has received the imprimatur of the National Council be used by educational authorities for purposes of instruction.

The mobilization of our National Guard troops gives to Dr. May's pamphlet on the Prevention of Venereal Diseases in the Army particular interest at this time to students of venereal disease control.

THE PREVENTION OF VENEREAL DISEASES IN THE ARMY.

By OTTO MAY, M.A., M.D., ETC.

Joint Hon. Sec. National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases.

Even in time of peace, venereal diseases exact a heavy toll from the health and efficiency of the Army. Thus, in 1912, they were responsible for 25.3 per cent. of the "constantly sick," equivalent to a loss of 216,445 days, or an average of over two days for each man in the service. Experience from the past shows that war is apt to bring in its train a large increase in these diseases, and the effort to combat this tendency has been one of the least important activities arising out of the present struggle. It needs but little reflection to realize two of the factors making for such an increase at the present time: the gathering of enormous numbers of young men into camps, away from home influences, and the wave of emotionalism that swamped the self-restraint of so many girls and young women, particularly in the early months of the War. To the former factor must be added, in the case of troops doing garrison duty abroad, the wide facilities for infection afforded by licensed brothels, especially dangerous from the specious sense of security engendered by their municipal recognition. Yet, in spite of these adverse conditions, it is satisfactory to find that the Royal Commission on Venereal Diseases, in their Final Report, state (par. 237) : "There is no reason to believe that the percentage of infection in the naval and military forces is now greater than in normal times; but there can be no doubt that the total of infected persons has increased." Apart from one or two districts, where special conditions have resulted in large outbreaks of disease, the conditions in this country are as favourable as could reasonably be expected, though the total number of cases is very considerable, resulting in an appreciable impairment of the Army's efficiency.

The object of this article in THE PRACTITIONER is to describe briefly the principal means employed in diminishing the incidence of these diseases, and to indicate the lines on which further effort is

desirable. The principal means of prevention may be roughly classified as follows:—

- I.—Educational.
- II.—Diminution of opportunities for exposure to infection.
- III.—Artificial prophylaxis.

I.—EDUCATIONAL.

(1) *Instruction of the Soldier.*—Soon after the appointment of the Royal Commission, a number of the leaders of the medical profession, in association with other workers in national health and eugenics, decided to form a National Council for Combating Venereal Diseases, the object being "to promote the education of the public in matters connected with the incidence, dangers, prevention, and cure of these diseases." Shortly after the outbreak of war, this Council was brought into actual being, and one of its first activities was to approach the Secretary of State for War, through the Director General of the Army Medical Service, with an offer to assist in the education of the troops on the subject of venereal disease by means of suitable lectures. The offer being accepted, a syllabus was drawn up, which was approved by the War Secretary. It may be summarized as follows:—

- (a) Description of the two diseases, gonorrhœa and syphilis, with their complications, sequelæ, and effects on the offspring.
- (b) Insistence on the need of early and efficient treatment, and the danger of concealment or use of quack remedies.
- (c) Prevention guaranteed only by keeping out of the way of possible infection; exposure of the fallacy that only professional prostitutes are dangerous; in many cases the "amateur" is equally or more dangerous.
- (d) Denunciation of the idea that continence is ever harmful, and that incontinence is an essential attribute of "manliness."
- (e) The contributory effect of alcoholic indulgence by diminishing self-control.
- (f) The importance of each man keeping fit from the point of view of efficiency of the Army.

In these lectures the question of artificial prophylaxis has not, hitherto, been included. This was at the express desire of the

Secretary of State for War, which coincided with the view of the Council. As soon as instruction is given in methods of artificial prevention, the danger arises of its being regarded as a tacit encouragement to incontinence, thus rendering nugatory a large part of the educational value of the lecture. (This is referred to again in Section III.)

Up to the present time (March, 1916) more than 750 lectures have been given to some 500,000 troops, and they have been in every case well, and even enthusiastically, received. There can be little doubt that they exert a great influence for good. At the lowest, they make the men more careful and less inclined to attempt concealment of disease, so fertile a cause of future trouble. But in all probability they effect much more, particularly in the case of young soldiers, whose habits are as yet unformed, and who may be regarded as plastic material to be moulded, to a large extent, by their environment. So many of these take the first step in incontinence, not so much from the uncontrollable prompting of sexual desire, as from living in an atmosphere in which incontinence is "the thing." In the last few decades, the Army has, to a large extent, freed itself from the tradition that drunkenness is the highest social virtue, and there is good ground for hoping that these lectures will help to create a corresponding new atmosphere as regards sexual matters—one in which chastity will cease to be regarded as a sort of moral aberration.

The Royal Commissioners attach importance to instruction in these matters is evidenced by No. 34 of their recommendations: "Every man on joining the Navy or Army should, at the earliest possible period, be fully warned of the grave dangers which venereal diseases involve, and the warning should be formally repeated at intervals of not less than a year." At the present time, instruction is given by officers of the R.A.M.C.,¹ but the nature of the teaching is left to the discretion of the individual officer. While in many cases sound instruction is doubtless given, in others it appears to be perfunctory, and to consist largely of hints on artificial prophylaxis. Nevertheless, in some such cases, commanding officers seem satisfied that everything needful has been done, and have refused the offers of the National Council to provide lectures or put difficulties in the way of their delivery. It is highly desirable that, in the future, methodical instruction from an approved syllabus should

¹ Royal Army Medical Corps.

form part of the training of every recruit in the Army. The present time, when such a large proportion of the young men of the country is under military discipline, affords a unique opportunity for their education in a matter of pre-eminent importance to the health of the community.

(2) *Instruction of the Female Population.*—The education of girls and young women in these matters is an essential complement to that of the men. Up to the present time, very little direct work of this kind has been accomplished, and girls have, in most cases, been left to realize the existence of these diseases by bitter experience. A beginning has, however, been made by the delivery of several courses of lectures to women social workers, under the auspices of the National Council. These lectures, by various well-known medical women, deal with the problems of sex, motherhood, and disease, and the audiences consist of rescue workers, nurses, and members of various organizations, such as the Mothers' Union, the National Union for Women Workers, the Parents' National Educational Society, the National Organization of Girls' Clubs, the Y.W.C.A., etc.

These audiences utilize the knowledge thus acquired to instruct the girls among whom they work, and in course of time this method should accomplish a good deal of what is required in this connection.

II.—DIMINUTION OF OPPORTUNITIES FOR EXPOSURE TO INFECTION.

Under this heading may be mentioned the various factors, apart from education, which have aimed at the diminution of promiscuous intercourse.

(1) *Provision of Opportunities for Recreation.*—The work done by the Y.M.C.A., Church Army, and similar organizations has been of the greatest utility in providing men with entertainments, etc., without the necessity of their seeking them in public-houses, cinemas, and on the streets. There is not the slightest doubt that the aimless promenading in darkened streets, so familiar a feature of all garrison towns, is a fertile source of danger to the soldier, and anything that gives him other means of occupying his spare time, is a powerful aid to the avoidance of temptation.

(2) *Drink Restriction.*—Alcohol and venereal disease are such close allies, that the action of the Liquor Control Board in limiting the facilities for obtaining the former must react favourably on the prevention of the latter. Drink, of course, leads to venereal infec-

tion by diminishing the man's self-control and judgment, and so letting him fall an easy victim to his desires or to the blandishments of the prostitute. In addition, the public-house is so often the favoured resort of these women, that the restricted hours of opening (especially the earlier closing) limit their activities to a considerable degree. If the Board could see their way to still further restrictions, the Army would benefit from every point of view. It need hardly be pointed out that the same result would be obtained by the Military Authorities placing licensed premises "out of bounds," to a larger degree than is at present the case in most districts.

(c) *Control of Loose Women.*—There are two fairly distinct classes of women concerned in the spread of these diseases, (a) professional prostitutes, (b) those who indulge in promiscuous intercourse while following some other occupation for their livelihood. There is reason to believe that, since the outbreak of war, the latter class has increased considerably in number in the neighbourhood of large camps. Their presence forms a serious menace, for these girls are often ignorant of the dangers of their mode of life, and may spread disease without being actually aware of their having become infected. Further, the police are naturally diffident about interfering, unless they encounter actual indecency, and the darkened condition of the streets and public open spaces affords ample opportunity for clandestine wrongdoing. Some useful work among this class has been done by "women patrols," organized by the National Union of Women Workers. These patrols consist usually of two women, in plain clothes, experienced in rescue work. They take notice of girls who habitually hang about the camp, and endeavour by persuasion and admonition, to save them from lapsing into vicious courses.

As regards actual prostitutes, the state of affairs is extremely unsatisfactory. No organized effort has been made by local authorities, civil or military, to prevent their migration into large military centres. The situation is, admittedly, a difficult one to deal with, for, apparently, the law, as it stands, cannot prevent these women from moving from place to place as they like. What is required, however, is the strict enforcement, by local authorities, of their existing by-laws against solicitation, vagrancy, and brothels, with the adoption, if necessary, of additional more stringent by-laws on the same subject. Further, the "Defence of the Realm Act" gives very wide powers to the authorities in dealing with undesirable

persons in military areas. At the present time, it seems to be applied only against actual or potential spies, but steps should be taken to make it equally applicable to disorderly women, etc.² The prevention of disease among soldiers is, surely, an important factor in the "Defence of the Realm." Power should be obtained to prevent the entry into, or to deport from, such areas, of all women whose presence may reasonably be supposed to be prejudicial to the health of the troops. The danger of mistakes would have to be minimized by the right of appeal to some easily accessible tribunal, but there is no reason to suppose that mistakes of this sort would occur to any appreciable extent. The mere existence of such powers, when it became known, would act as a deterrent, and keep these women from flocking into towns of military importance.

A simpler alternative scheme for preventing these women from invading military areas would be to place such areas under strict military control, and to refuse admission into such districts to any person not provided with a suitable passport. These passports should be refused to any person unable to show a satisfactory reason for their move into such an area.

In this connection mention should be made of the Women Police Service, working under the joint authority of the civil and military police. A few towns have recently tried the experiment of appointing these trained women (who wear uniform), and the results have been distinctly encouraging; there is hope that the extension of the system may help materially to check the evil of prostitution. Another very useful function of these Women Police

² The Government have recently made the following new Regulation under their powers for the Defence of the Realm, for application to a special military area where there has been a large outbreak of venereal disease:—

"Where a person who has been convicted of any offence in connexion with the keeping, managing, or assisting in the management of, a brothel, or of any offence as a prostitute, or of any offence under paragraph (b) of subsection (1) of section one of the Vagrancy Act, 1898, or of the Immoral Traffic (Scotland) Act, 1902, or of contravening any provision in any Act, whether public, general or local, or any bylaw, for the prevention of indecent conduct in public places, resides in or frequents any place where any bodies of His Majesty's Forces are assembled or the vicinity thereof, the competent naval or military authority may, by order, prohibit such person from residing in or frequenting such place or the vicinity thereof, and if the person to whom the order relates contravenes any of the provisions of the order such person shall be guilty of an offence against these Regulations."

is the protection of children and young girls from molestation, and they are particularly useful in taking evidence from children at the police courts. Should any powers of deportation of undesirable women be granted to local authorities, it might be wise to give the necessary powers of search and arrest to members of the Women Police Service, and the examination of supposed diseased prostitutes should certainly be in the hands of medical women.

III.—ARTIFICIAL PROPHYLAXIS.

No discussion of the subject of prevention of venereal disease would be complete without reference to the question of the use of mechanical or chemical means of prophylaxis. The subject is a difficult one, for its consideration is impossible without the introduction of ethical or moral questions, on which opinions are often in sharp conflict and not always dispassionately argued. Two extreme schools of opinion may be said to exist, the one regarding the introduction of such measures as the complete solution of a problem, in which morals find no place, and the other looking with abhorrence on any proposals for diminishing the danger of illicit intercourse. As with so many other questions, the sanest and most practical attitude is to be found between these extremes. The encouragement of continence by education, temperance, and the provision of suitable recreation for the body and mind is undoubtedly of the utmost importance in diminishing disease, and should be pursued with all possible vigour in the Services. But it is futile to pretend that nothing more is necessary, and that all men will respond to these efforts, and become monuments of "virtue." As a supplement to these efforts, the provision of some form of artificial prophylaxis is undeniably necessary, if *all* steps are to be taken to control these diseases.

On the other hand, such provision *alone* would be lamentably deficient. Even apart from the encouragement thus given to incontinence, with its many social ill-consequences, it would fail to achieve its object. However efficient the methods might be in theory, it would be impossible in practice to make certain of their employment in every case, particularly when the man is more or less inebriated at the time of his debauch. Experience in the Austrian and German armies seems to show that the provision of various preventive measures diminishes, but by no means abolishes, the incidence of disease.

* * * This method of supplying prophylactic apparatus in

advance, is obviously open to considerable criticism, unless definitely accompanied by clear insistence on the advantage of continence. A less objectionable scheme, and one specially suitable for the Army, would be the provision at camps, depots, etc., of preventive treatment, under medical control, for the man to avail himself of as soon as possible after exposure. * * *

The utilization of such measures could be made compulsory, by severely punishing all men found to be suffering from venereal disease who had not availed themselves of this treatment. Such compulsion would have, however, the serious practical disadvantage of tending to encourage concealment of disease, and it is probable that the provision of "voluntary" opportunity for this "early treatment," combined with sound instruction on the educational lines sketched above, offers the best solution of the problem of diminishing these diseases in the Army.

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